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ABU BEN ALADDIN: A JUST-SO NIGHT

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BY

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ABU BEN ALADDIN : A JUST-SO NIGHT



NCE upon a time there was an Arab whose name was ABU BEN ALADDIN. He lived in Arabia, or to be more definite in that part of Arabia which is infelicitously called *Arabia Felix*.

Now *Arabia Felix* is a trackless desert. In the respect of being trackless it resembled *New York State* after CHARLIE HUGHES' famous anti-racing campaign, but as this is the only respect in which it ever resembled *New York State*, there is little chance of confusion here. It might however be confused with *Boothia Felix*, which is also a trackless desert ; but as *Arabia Felix* is very hot and *Boothia Felix* is very cold, the two places should be carefully distinguished. All possibility of falling into the endless chain of error and misapprehension which might arise from confounding the two may be avoided by the simple mnemonic device of associating the *F* in *Arabia Felix* with the word *Fire* and carefully guarding against the formation of a similar association in the case of *Boothia Felix*.

ABU had many wives, among whom there was one who had a name which if transliterated into English would look like the name of one of the complex methylated diazo compounds of organic chemistry, and when pronounced would sound like an exceptionally long line of a Pindaric ode read metrically. We will therefore call her JOSEPHINE for short. She was more precious in ABU's sight than any of his other wives, to say nothing of his concubines and of course the less said about them the better.

Now ABU had many possessions, but the larger part of his wealth consisted of an enormous herd of finely bred camels, in which he took great pride. They were fed on the choicest fodder that the country provided (which is not saying much), and when the store of dates and cocoa-nut oil ran low, he and his whole establishment subsisted on camel's milk.

Our hero was a man of a highly reflective type of mind. He would often go out from his tent, seat himself on a sand-drift, and think. He cogitated on such fundamental problems as pre-established harmony, the eternal fitness of things, and the atomic theory of the universe. While so engaged he would often fall into a train of ratiocinative thought which involved such prodigious cerebration that there was distinctly visible around his head an aura

which looked like the brush discharge from a high-potential electrode.

One day while evolving a theory of the granular structure of the luminiferous ether, his thought activity assumed such unusual violence that he did not notice the coming of a sand storm and disregarded it even after it was upon him. Finally however a terrific gust tore up a large piece of slate, which in falling hit him on the bean. This aroused him to the consciousness of an unmistakable disharmony between his physical organism and its immediate environment. As he started at top speed for his tent, there arose in his mind a vehement longing for the flower-spangled shores of the *Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb*, where the coffee-blossom spreads its gorgeous petals and the air is ever fragrant with the delicate odor of the night-blooming jessamine. When at length he arrived at his tent, he was so exhausted that he fell unconscious to the ground. Then JOSEPHINE and her hand-maidens ministered to him and laid him on his couch.

When he awoke the next morning, his ears still resounded with the babbling of mellifluous *Bab-el-Mandeb*, and he gave orders at once to start for its sun-kissed shores. Then after a scene of indescribable hurry and confusion they were at length all mounted on camels ready to start the journey. When ABU

gave the word of command, they all stepped off at once, simultaneously and together. To relieve the tedium of the journey they sang many sweet songs, among which were *I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles*, *Not Because Your Hair Is Curly*, and *Who Put the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder?*

On the second day of the journey one of the ladies who was riding near to ABU cried, 'Look you, my Lord, at yon monstrous beast far away in the offing! Methinks 't is a kangaroo, or a dinosaur, or peradventure a nifty-udellum.'

Then ABU looked, and as he looked he smiled; but the lady was smit with sore amaze, for ABU's countenance usually bore a rather sober and subdued expression such as you would expect to see on the face of one who during twenty years of solitary confinement had meditated on nothing but judgment, condemnation, and the second death. He answered her forthwith, 'Not so, my Lady; the pristine clarity of your intellect is clouded o'er by the wild phantasmagorical imagery of a fevered dream. What you see is only a wild *Bedouin* coursing over the desert's burning sands on his fleet-footed charger.'

After traveling many days, in which they covered 647×10^{23} micro-millimeters or (if you prefer to think in larger units of distance) ex-

actly 3.17×10^{17} light-years, they were near to their destination but not so near that anticipations of arrival served to assuage the discomforts of the journey. They therefore diverted themselves with conversation.

'My Lord!' quoth JOSEPHINE, 'If I remember correctly, it was OMAR KHAYYAM who wrote the quatrain which readeth thus:

"And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,
Whereunder crawling coop'd we live& die,
Lift not your hands to It for help—for it
As impotently rolls as you or I."

'Thou hast spoken sooth, Lady,' replied ABU: 'it was the inimitable OMAR, the *Astronomer Poet of Persia*, who wrote that beautiful stanza.'

'Why do you call him inimitable,' replied JOSEPHINE, 'for herein he seems to imply that we would all admit unquestioningly that we roll constantly and unceasingly?'

'The words are figurative,' replied ABU; 'we are all involved in the whirling maelstrom of a Bergsonian flux, and it is this which the poet has in mind.'

'But I don't care! I just don't roll,' insisted JOSEPHINE.

Then ABU frowned, and he spoke chidingly to her and said, 'Cease your carping criticism of that which is beyond your feeble comprehension. For you to amend the glorious OMAR

in either form or content would be as if one were to try to enhance the flawless beauty of the lily's snowy chalice with a white-wash brush and a bucket of red barn paint.'

This marital rebuke seemed to touch the raw of a subconscious Freudian idea-complex in JOSEPHINE's mind, and she retreated to the inner precincts of her own subjectivity.

And now they were almost in view of the watery main—even the much-desired shores of the *Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb*. Then ABU said, 'Listen! Hear you not how the sound of the silvery babbling of *Bab-el-Mandeb* looms up in the distance?'

'But, my Lord,' cried one of the party, 'a sound can't loom.'

'Well,' replied ABU, 'if I am in the company of those who require such punctilious exactness of expression, I will amend my statement and say that the sound behaves exactly like a thing which can loom when it is in the act of looming.'

Then they arrived at the shore. But arriving at a place bears a close analogy to the attainment of a limit by a mathematical variable, and as we all know, there are many difficulties involved in this. Does it really attain the limit or only indefinitely approach it? To decide whether they really arrived or not, an analysis something like the following is required to

establish the necessary & sufficient conditions for arrival. Given a definite epoch t_1 and a corresponding finite distance from the goal d_1 , it must be possible, for any arbitrarily small distance d_2 assigned in advance, to find an epoch t_2 and a corresponding distance d_2 such that $d_2 < d_1$ however small d_1 may be, the time interval $t_1 - t_2$ being finite.

It is thus seen that when, in the play called *The Highwayman*, the principal character, FOXY QUILLER, walks pompously on the stage and, striking an attitude, exclaims in rotund tones, 'Something tells me I have arrived,' the philosophically minded will not be inclined to regard this as mere broad comedy but rather as a case of cutting the Gordian knot of logic with the shining sword of intuition.

They then pitched their tents, all the time inhaling deep breaths of the perfume-laden air, and their hearts were filled with gladness. The illustrious citizens of the place greeted them kindly and made a great banquet for them, at which they feasted many days. But as time went on, ABU bethought him of merchandise, and he let build great ships, in which he traded in camel's hair when the trade-winds were blowing, and those who bought the camel's hair made it into camel's hair brushes. He thought how fitting and reasonable a thing it is to trade by the trade-winds in camel's hair

for making camel's hair brushes, nor did the thought escape him what an alogical, disjointed, and incomprehensible universe this would be if real camel's hair brushes could be made with no component of camel's hair whatever.

As his riches increased he caused a great course to be built, on which he raced his camels when he desired recreation from the tedium of business, and he challenged other noble *Arabs* to match their camels against his. This diversion he greatly enjoyed when the track was fast, but when it rained it irked him sore to see his royally bred beasts slopping through the unspeakable mire. This and other inconveniences disturbed his equanimity, but on reflection he concluded that, in spite of all the hazards and hardships of finite selfhood, his own lot was about as happy as it could be in a universe whose fundamental constitution is such that no mortal can reasonably expect to get place odds on a two-horse race.

Thus he lived many years, increasing in wealth and honor; and in the fullness of time he was gathered to his fathers, being old and full of days.

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